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ABSTRACT

A study of junior high schools (MacDonald 1995) found that students and administrators held significantly different perceptions regarding the nature, extent, and management of violent behaviors. This paper presents findings of a study conducted 1 year later that more thoroughly examined students' perceptions of the effectiveness of current school practices designed to deal with violent behaviors. Focus-group interviews were conducted with students in grades 7, 8, and 9 from five K-9 schools in a western Canadian province. The general consensus among students was that school practices and policies were partially responsible for fostering a culture of meanness. The study concludes that a safe environment can exist when there is an ethic of caring. Staff should be committed to an ethic of caring and model the behaviors they expect of their students. Discipline, when necessary, should be regarded as an opportunity to teach students interpersonal skills, and policies should focus on prevention and rehabilitation. Discipline policies should not model intolerance, intimidation, and lack of reconciliation, and should deal with violence as a symptom of other issues (for example, boredom, frustration, alienation) using preventative strategies. Finally, the government should provide resources to deal with students' needs, which would help to counteract teachers' piecemeal response to complex issues that demand diagnosis, planning, evaluation, understanding, time, and money. (Contains 13 references.) (LMI)

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SCHOOL VIOLENCE: REDIRECTING THE STORM CHASERS

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BACKGROUND

School Violence: Public and Personal Perspectives

Historically, "school violence" has been linked to criminal activities that occurred at school: gang wars, illicit drug use, vandalism, weapon possession, and personal assault. In the past decade especially, the term has been broadened beyond the more traditional legal context:

> violence is unjust or unwarranted exercise of force, usually with the accompaniment of vehemence, outrage, or fury (Black's Law Dictionary)

Schools boards across Canada have made a point of expanding "violence" to include non-physical acts, harassment, and verbal slurs thereby recognizing that there are victims of violent, unindictable, deliquent behaviors who should not be ignored. The following are examples that have enabled schools to recast inappropriate behaviors within the framework of "violence:"

> violence is the threat of/or use of force that injures or intimidates a person (makes that person feel afraid) or damages property (B.C. Teachers' Federation Task Force on Violence, 1994)
>
> a violent activity is characterized by verbal or written threats, physical, emotional, sexual abuse or harassment; or racial harassment by an individual or group of individuals which have the effect of impairing or might have the effect of impairing the health and welfare of any student or staff member (Wellington County Board of Education)
>
> all physical and nonphysical acts that are seriously harmful to others, unjust and/or unlawful (Student Conduct and the School Environment: A Background Paper, Alberta Education, 1993)

Given this reinterpretation, it is probable that throughout their twelve years of formal education, every child will experience school violence at school- either as a victim, perpetrator or witness. As a parent whose child was victimized by a bully in elementary school, I learned that recognizing that violence takes many forms, does not simplify a complex and often emotional issue. After medical records were shown to the principal, attesting to the gravity of my child's injuries, the school's response was to set up a relationship between the bully and my son so that my son could play "mentor" to the other boy. This resulted in an unworkable situation, with unfortunate consequences: for the remainder of his elementary and junior high school years, my child never again provided me with an explanation for his bruises, scars, or missing property. "I can't remember," "I have already dealt with it myself," or "its not a big deal" were the most common responses to any inquires. Although I had nothing beyond

circumstantial evidence, I often wondered what coping skills my child had adopted that demanded so little parental intervention (e.g., retaliation, avoidance, denial)? In fact, research has indicated that many students intentionally do not report most incidents of violence from a fear of reprisals, a belief that such behaviours are normal, and a lack of satisfaction with how victims and perpetrators of violence are dealt with by school staff (MacDonald, 1997).

In 1993, a resolution was presented at the Alberta School Boards' Association annual convention asking that trustees work towards the prevention, intervention and response to violent behaviors in their schools. The vote was not unanimous and a number of dissenters voiced concern that dealing with violence was beyond the realm of schooling and was therefore best left to law enforcement or social service agencies. After all, some suggested, schools could not be expected to eradicate complex society problems. The question that other trustees asked was: "do we really have a problem with school violence?" Since few districts formally recorded any but the most serious incidents, the answer lay more in "gut feeling" and that feeling was that little violence existed.

Research conducted by MacDonald (1995) also pointed to the belief by principals, that there was no real problem of violence in their own school. In this study, data were collected from students representing five Alberta junior high schools, and 28 administrators regarding their understanding of the nature and frequency of school violence. Analysis of variances between administrators' (n=28) and students' (n=231) questionnaire responses showed significant statistical differences. Administrators perceived that school violence was less of a problem and that their staff were more aware of school violence than students felt they were. Craig and Pepler's (cited in Pepler & Craig, 1994) observations of school ground supervision also pointed to a discrepancy between the extent of violence experienced by students, and that observed by teachers. In their work on bullying, Craig and Pepler also noted that teachers responded to less than five percent of the bullying incidents that the researchers themselves observed on the playground. In citing reasons for the reluctance of schools to report weapon use, police in Walker's study (1994) ranked "denial or avoidance that a problem exists," "not recognizing there is a problem," as the top factors of thirteen possible answers (p. 17).

Administrators in the Alberta study (MacDonald, 1995) also sensed that their students were more satisfied with the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence. With regard to student reporting, administrators were more confident that students would inform school staff about witnessing or being a victim of school violence than students indicated they would.

Approximately 75% of students said that they felt safe at school "most of the time," or "always," yet over one-half of male students stated that they had experienced physical forms of violence such as, fights, bullying, punching, hitting, grabbing, verbal threats, theft or damage to property. One-fifth of male

students indicated that they had been threatened with a weapon at school, and ethnic conflict affected one-third of male respondents. Despite the fact that only 4% of students responded that they never felt safe at school, 20% of students observed weapons and over 50% considered bullying to be "very big" or "big" problems.

In Ontario, Ryan, Mathews, and Banner (1993) also concluded that physical and non-physical acts of violence were committed by students on a regular basis: 29% of grades 6-9 students had been threatened, 31% bullied, and 16% beaten-up while at school. The Smith, Bertrand, Arnold and Hornick study (1995) of 962 junior and senior high school students in Calgary, identified nine types of victimizations: "something damaged, something stolen, something taken by force, threatened, slapped or kicked, threatened with weapon, attacked by group/gang, someone exposed themselves, sexually touched against will." Of these, something stolen (55.6%), something damaged (43.6%), being threatened (42.3%), and being slapped or kicked (37.1%) were the most prevalent victimizations identified amongst students.

After the 1994 resolution was passed at the Alberta convention, a number of districts reassessed their discipline policies and sponsored new initiatives such as zero tolerance for violence, surveillance cameras and increased sanctions for violent behavior. These appear to be the most common responses to dealing with school violence: increased sanctions and punitive measures. Day, Golench, MacDougall and Beals-Gonzalez (1995) also found that zero tolerance policies, which seek to punish or suppress serious disruptive or violent behaviors by suspending or expelling students, were becoming increasingly popular choices in Canada, even though research suggested alternatives-to-suspensions programs were more effective (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1995).Despite indications that more comprehensive strategies are required, a recent national survey (Day et al., 1995) on school-based violence-reduction policies, showed that fewer than 20% of the 126 respondent school boards in Canada had policies on: victim aftermath programs, procedures for policy/program evaluation, alternative-to-suspension programs, or screening curricula for violent content.

Storm Chasers

The Internet maintains a number of websites related to weather and climatic conditions. Amongst these, is the *Storm Chaser Homepage*. The purpose of this electronic site is to provide the most up-to date information to those individuals who regularly seek out and chase severe storms, in particular, tornadoes. These "storm chasers" operate on the premise that tornadoes are inevitable; the only mysteries left unanswered are: "when?", "where?" and "how destructive?"

Statistically, not all severe storms develop into tornadoes, nor do all funnel clouds touch down. For this reason, there are more threats, than actual occurrences. This is why storm chasers need to rely

heavily on hunches, speculation, and past experience. In recent years, the Internet has provided them with a faster and more expeditious way of sharing, amongst themselves, often unsubstantiated information, hearsay and rumors which with luck, will result in witnessing one of nature's most powerful and destructive forces. Storm chasers focus on the culmination of the many natural forces that result in a tornado; and are not interested in the elements, themselves. Storm chasers are neither researchers nor scientists. They come from many walks of life, with a common hobby: to experience the danger and thrills of witnessing one of the most powerful forces on earth.

Storm chasers do not consider themselves to be anything more than passive observers of the main event. In their view, they simply seek readily accessible, limited amounts of information, and react. They do not concern themselves with why tornadoes occur in a specific area, or attempt to better understand the factors that influence the nature and severity of storms. Each year, their methods to monitor and respond become more sophisticated. They record and rank each tornado they witness, by its destructive force and speed using cameras, camcorders, cellular telephones, binoculars, small satellite dishes to hook up to weather channels, portable computers, and mobile weather instruments. Although the media shows its public the destruction wrought by tornadoes, in reality, over 70% are of the light-to-moderate-damage category, with winds of between 40-112 mph. Tornadoes that cause severe damage and loss of life, are not frequent- they just make the news.

The Professionals

The scientists who study tornados, in contrast to the storm chasers, are not hobbyists. Their careers are built on gaining an in-depth understanding of the many factors which influence complex phenomena (not just tornadoes); climatic as well as industrial (e.g., pollution, jet streams).

In Canada, the *Institute for Climate Studies*, provides the public and the scientific community with information on climate: its variability, trends, and changes. Understanding the influence of climate on the society and economics of Canada, and developing strategies to minimize the impacts of climate on Canadians, are the major goals of this government agency. The research arm of the organization meets frequently with international colleagues, in order to share knowledge and expertise in climate information and its application to decision makers in the public and private sector. In turn, such decisions are evaluated in order to determine their impact on climatic changes.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

One of the recommendations that emerged from MacDonald's work (1995) with junior high school students, was to invite educators to validate the effectiveness of current policies and practices related to violence in schools. This suggestion emerged by reason of students' and administrators' significantly different perception regarding the nature, extent and management of violent behaviors. The research study discussed in this paper, took place a year later and had as its aim, a more thorough examination of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of current school practices designed to deal with violent behaviors.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings and conclusions of this study, and in so doing, recognize and re-direct the storm chasing strategies we too often adopt to deal with this complex social issue.

DATA SOURCE AND COLLECTION

This study utilized a focus interview with students in grades 7, 8 and 9 from five K-9 schools in a western Canadian province. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were conducted on-site. In each school, male and female students from each of the representative grades were asked to come together as a group and discuss the following issues: (a) what the term "school violence" encompassed in their school, (b) to what extent violent behaviors affected their schooling experience, (c) how school violence was dealt with by staff and students, (d) the perceived fairness and effectiveness of student and staff responses to violence, and (e) suggestions for improving how schools deal with the victims, witnesses and perpetrators of violent behaviors.

School Demographics

Five K-9 schools from the same district participated in the study. Three of the schools were located in an urban centre with a population of approximately 60,000. This community was largely white, lower-middle to middle class with a high percentage of young families.

The remaining two schools in the study were located in small rural communities, approximately 40 miles from the urban centre (one south, one north). The community to the south of the urban centre is largely agricultural, with a high population of retirees. The more northern community is both agricultural and petrochemical. Youth crime, youth gangs, or ethnic tension are not known to be major concerns in any of these three communities.

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Analysis

Analysis of the transcripts identified similarities and differences between how students in each school responded to the interview questions. Emergent "themes" were recognized, based on commonalties of data, and issues identified by the students to be of importance to them.

RESULTS

The Nature and Effects of School Violence

The data suggested that students experienced more threats than actual physical violence, and more verbal aggression in the form of teasing, put-downs, intimidation, and harassment. In all schools that participated, students agreed that what they identified as violence was not necessarily the same as what teachers would define. For example, horseplay, joking and teasing amongst friends was often taken too seriously by teacher witnesses and not seen as "normal" social interaction amongst teenagers. At the same time, students felt that teachers frequently ignored serious verbal conflicts: often a precursor to physical violence. The outcome was inconsistent, unfair and ineffective responses to both verbal and physical violence.

Students challenged the notion that violent behaviors in schools were limited to student-teacher, and student-student interations. They felt that insufficient emphasis had been placed on teacher-student violence, in the form of threats of punishments, intimidation, and verbal put-downs. In a sense, students reframed the meaning of school violence, expanding that frame to include staff as well as student perpetrators.

Students recognized that anger was more prevalent in junior high than elementary, but were unclear as to how to manage it. Previous strategies, such as informing an adult, were not considered viable options in junior high for various reasons (e.g., fear of retaliation, not wanting to be viewed as "a rat"). Standards also appeared to have changed: words once prohibited in their earlier grades (e.g., "hell, pissed-off") were no longer noticed and corrected by teachers. In fact, teachers themselves often used such words. A mutually exhibited lack of respect for members of the school community was noted by all participants, often resulting in a perception by students that teachers did not enjoy being among them:

> Elementary teachers are more relaxed...in junior high they just assume that kids are all bad.

> Once you get into here [junior high school] they consider you a delinquent, and trouble. I really miss how nice and caring the teachers all were in elementary school...it was a friendlier place.

Favoritism, inconsistent and unequal punishment, and a presumption of guilt extended towards males and older students were also concerns that students highlighted. The reputations teachers had of students were difficult to influence and were perceived to be unduly influential in the determination of punishments and assumption of guilt.

In lieu of increasing sanctions and punitive consequences for misbehavior, students recommended that a greater emphasis be placed on the learning of pro-social behaviors, such as acceptable strategies for dealing with conflicts. Students recognized that although it would be more time-consuming for teachers, the benefits for more thoughtful consequences would be greater, than writing out lines, standing in the hallway, or being sent home for a few days to watch television.

Students also reflected on their desire to see an ethic of caring, a kinder and gentler approach to the schooling of junior high school students: components of an environment that they experienced in their elementary years:

> Its like I lost my second Mom in elementary and now have prison wardens who are looking out not for me, but for what I am doing bad...no one sees the positive stuff happening anymore.

DISCUSSION

An Ethic of Caring

Whereas a number of inconsistencies were noted (e.g., teachers should ignore fun teasing, versus too much teasing is ignored by teachers), the general consensus amongst students was that school practices and policies were partially responsible for fostering a culture of meanness:

> Everything they tell us not to do they seem to do: get angry, pick on people, act mean, threaten us, and hold grudges. I don't even think some of them like kids at all.

Although violence amongst young people can be as a result of factors not under the direct control of schools (e.g., family stress), it can also be a response to the frustration, alienation, and sense of injustice that students experience within the school. A safe environment can exist when there is an ethic of caring. Achieving a safe teaching and learning environment requires strategies that should not be limited to just responding to violence when it occurs, through sanctions (e.g., detentions, suspensions, expulsions). Rather, discipline, when necessary, should be regarded as an opportunity to teach students social skills, rather than a way of punishing social illiteracy:

> ...don't just tell us that we did something wrong, tell us what to do instead...there's too much time spent on ultimatums and not enough on alternatives.

> When they give alternatives, they are stupid, you're not going to just talk it out with the person hitting you...kids don't tell adults because they make it worse.

As noted by the students themselves, policies and programs are required which focus on the prevention of serious disruptive behaviours, as well as the rehabilitiation of all students who are affected by such behaviours: victims, witnesses and perpetrators. Practical experience indicates that efforts to prevent violence, as well as attempts to calmly respond to hostile conflicts when they do occur, are the most effective means for addressing serious disruptive behaviors in schools. Despite such knowledge, the most common response to the increase of school violence has been a "get-tough" stance. Unfortunately, measures to simply toughen discipline often fail due to the inappropriate goal of controlling students rather than empowering them to control themselves. Moreover, the conclusions of Dill and Haberman (1994) are supported by the perception by students in this study, that get-tough practices seem to exacerbate problems and lead to more school violence than safety:

> I feel really badly about this one boy who is always picked on by the teacher, always put down. Its not always the kids who are the bullies...it made the kid behave worse.

Re-Directing the Storm Chasers

Educators have a tremendous opportunity to influence the lives of their students. They represent a profession, who possesses a unique body of knowledge and expertise gained through years of formal and informal education. Their work requires independent judgment, comprehensive evaluation, and critical thinking -- not just knee-jerk reactions. The profession often dedicates itself to taking on many societal problems which are outside the purview of its mandate, resulting in stress and frustration (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 1993). Teachers themselves, lament the implementation of poorly understood practices, mandated by administration, with little or no philosophical underpinnings (p. 25).

As professionals, educators are invited to re-examine prior knowledge and assumptions regarding the effectiveness of practices used to build and sustain a safe and caring school environment. The students in this study asked for a better understanding of the factors that influence the nature and severity of severely disruptive and violent behaviors in schools. They urged their schools to step beyond the traditional models of discipline: monitor, judge and respond, and see the "bigger picture." Unfortunately, we often neglect to validate our models with students: intelligent, thoughtful people, problem-solvers who are forced to live together on a daily basis (MacDonald, 1996).

Students neither want nor need storm chasers; mere hobbyists who continually equip themselves with more thorough methods and advanced tools to monitor, record and rank "destruction." Rather, they are asking their teachers and principals to re-think the assumption that violence and serious disruption are inevitable- the only questions being: when and where it will be manifested? Young people ask that we stop viewing them as the "d-s" of society: delinquents, disrupters, deviants, dysfunctional (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990) and recognize that such stereotypes offer little incentive to act in a

responsible and respectful manner. They do not want school violence to be viewed as just another societal problem that enters a school in the form of isolated outbursts from "dysfunctional" youths.

The storm chaser, despite more advanced monitoring and recording devices has done little to either advance our understanding of tornadoes, or prevent them from occurring. Just as the scientists who continually shape and re-shape their understandings of the many variables which influence storms, educators must ask themselves: which factors foster or reject a culture of violence in schools? At what level does our pedagogy impart pro-social behaviors on students? Felson's work (1994) linked the level and nature of violence in schools to the culture that the staff established. It would seem from the students who participated in this study, that the culture of caring and respect they experienced in elementary school is not always carried over to the junior high school environment. When the level of conflict and anger increases, can we always attribute it to the misbehavior of teens? In the view of students, school culture, practices, policies, and staff behavior play as great a role in influencing student behavior .

In the eyes of those young people who participated in this study, school should be enjoyable, interesting, and free from harm. Staff should be committed to an ethic of caring, and model behaviors expected of their students. Students need teachers who are prepared to take the time to understand the struggles that they are facing, in a world which often tolerates less from its children, than it is prepared to demand from its adults. Discipline, when necessary, should be regarded as an opportunity to teach students interpersonal skills, rather than a way of punishing social illiteracy. Discipline is in itself a response, and as such, should not model intolerance, intimidation and lack of reconciliation.

Dealing with violence as a symptom of other issues (e.g., boredom, frustration, alienation) provides opportunities for preventative strategies which long precede the "storms." For example, if governments provided schools with the necessary resources required to effectively deal with the multifaceted needs of the teaching-learning cycle, perhaps teachers would not have to resort to being "storm chasers" who respond in an often piecemeal way to complex issues which demand diagnosis, planning, evaluation, understanding, time and money.

The data suggests that students believe that some practices and policies within schools foster a culture of violence, through their intolerance for social illiteracy and obsession with response to violence. I believe that most teachers would agree. In a ideal world, there would be less stress, frustration, and more support from families, communities and government. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. The challenge will be: to re-direct the storm chasers, despite the political and economic climate which supports them.

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